

## Topic Page: [Kush](#)

Definition: **Kush** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Kingdom and former state in Nubia. Lasting from c.1000 bc to c. ad 350, it conquered Egypt in the 7th-8th centuries bc. It was later defeated by the Assyrians, and moved its capital to Meroë in the Sudan. After Roman and Arab attacks in the N, Meroë was captured by the Axumites around ad 350. The Kushites are thought to have fled W.

Summary Article: **Kush, Kingdom of**

From *Encyclopedia of Empire*

Africa

agriculture

Aksum

ancient history

archaeology

### **Abstract**

The Kingdom of Kush was a major power in the Nile valley for over 1000 years and, for a brief period around 700 bce, dominated it, controlling an empire stretching from Central Sudan to the Mediterranean. Heavily influenced by Egypt, Kushite civilization represented an amalgam of foreign influences from the north, originally Pharaonic, later Hellenistic and Roman, along with the indigenous African culture. In the far north entirely a riverine civilization, further south it spread out into the savannah. Its diverse economy supported a highly developed urban civilization as well as integrating a substantial nomadic population, underpinned by extensive agriculture and animal husbandry. Sitting athwart the major ancient trade route from central Africa its rulers amassed considerable wealth, reflected in their extensive monumental building projects and rich tombs marked by stone pyramids.

The Kingdom of Kush has a history spanning well over a millennium. When Rome was nothing but a group of huts on the Palatine Hill, Kush ruled an empire stretching at least from the confluence of the White and Blue Niles in central Sudan to the borders of the Mediterranean Sea, 1800 km as the crow flies and 3000 km along the Nile. Around 300 ce it still controlled much of the Nile Valley, from the First Cataract to the Blue Nile, possibly even extending its domain when the Roman emperor Diocletian (284–305 ce) was forced to make a strategic withdrawal along his southern Egyptian frontier.

Culminating around 1500 bce, the New Kingdom pharaohs of Egypt had destroyed their rival south of the First Nile Cataract, whose kings resided at Kerma, and established control over the Nile valley as far upstream as Jebel Barkal close to the Fourth Cataract. By 1100 bce, Egypt's control of its southern lands was waning. It is into the resulting power vacuum that the proto-Kushites stepped. Very little is known of the early history of Kush and its rise to power, before it embarked on its conquest of Egypt, which projected it into the ranks of a first rate supra-regional power. Whether it was a single dynamic individual or a dynasty that established control after the Egyptians withdrew or whether a number of regional power bases formed is uncertain, although the latter may more accurately reflect the political reality. The region around Jebel Barkal appears ultimately to have spawned a dynasty which, by military

prowess, coupled no doubt with diplomatic efforts, assumed dominance. This seems to have happened quickly, although the chronology is disputed. What is certain is that by the mid-8th century bce the king Kashta was powerful enough to move from his capital at Napata, a little downstream of the Fourth Cataract, into Egypt as far as Thebes, while his successor Piye in c.728 conquered the whole of Egypt (Török 1997: 159ff.). To the southeast there is evidence dating from only a few decades later of elite Kushite burials at Meroe, 260 km across the Bayuda Desert, indicating that the realm expanded a long way both upstream and downstream of Napata, by the end of the 8th century bce.

The earliest burial considered to be Kushite was excavated at el-Kurru, 12 km downstream of Napata, by the American Egyptologist George Reisner in 1919. Although heavily robbed, the simple pit-grave, marked on the surface by an earthen tumulus, had much more in common with local funerary practices than with those of the Egyptian elite who had dominated the region for over four centuries. However, the early Kushites rapidly assimilated many aspects of Egyptian pharaonic culture. This can be clearly seen at el-Kurru, where, within only a few generations, the tumulus had given way to a square stone monument, followed by the pyramid (Reisner 1920). The form of the pyramids was copied from those of the New Kingdom, which must have been prominent features of the local landscape. The pyramid was adopted as the only acceptable tomb monument for the rulers, and thereafter for the elite and others well down the social ladder.

At Napata lay Jebel Barkal, a place of considerable significance to the Ancient Egyptians. It was seen by them as the southern home of their main god Amun, considered to live in the mountain, known as “the Pure Mountain.” Many temples had been built at the foot of Jebel Barkal and inscriptions and statuary raised. The Kushites at an early stage in their development bought into the Egyptian myth of state and sought legitimization from Amun, who was adopted as the main deity of Kush. Whereas several centuries of direct Egyptian rule had failed to have a lasting impact on the people of the region, it is ironic that it was the Kushites themselves who voluntarily adopted Egyptian culture; when they marched into Egypt they were able to do so as the champions of the Kushite and Egyptian god Amun.

By 656 bce, in the face of Assyrian aggression, the Kushites were forced out of Egypt, but this does not seem to have had any profound political consequences. The same Kushite dynasty remained in power for generations, all kings after Tanweteamani choosing to be buried in the new royal cemetery founded by Taharqo at Nuri, a little upstream of Jebel Barkal. Although no longer exercising control over Egypt, they retained the title King of Upper and Lower Egypt for over a millennium. It may have been to crush any aspirations the Kushites held to re-establish their rule in Egypt that the Egyptian pharaoh Psametticus II expunged the names and representations of Kushite regalia from the monuments in Egypt and in 593 bce invaded Kush, penetrating at least as far upstream as the Nile bend at ed-Debba, if not as far as Napata, which, it has been claimed, was sacked at that time. This invasion has been associated with some of the most spectacular archaeological finds in Sudan: the discovery of caches of royal statues at Jebel Barkal in 1916 and at Kerma in 2003. Both caches are of large hard-stone statues of Kushite kings from Taharqo to Aspelta. The statues have been broken into pieces – by the soldiers of Psametticus, it has been claimed (see Bonnet and Valbelle 2007: 164ff)– and then carefully buried in pits, presumably after the Egyptians’ withdrawal. This interpretation is highly unlikely and is now untenable, in light of the discovery of what was almost certainly an identical cache at Dangeil, far upstream, in an area never reached by the Egyptians until the 1820s. These caches and the inscriptions of Aspelta and other members of the dynasty, where the king's name has been expunged, more likely

reflect political unrest and dynastic change.

It may have been one such dynastic change which brought about the final abandonment of the royal cemetery at Nuri after over 300 years of use, and the creation of a new burial ground at Meroe (see Figure 1), where almost all subsequent rulers were interred until the demise of the kingdom. This event was given great prominence by Reisner (1920), who used it to divide the Kushite period into two, that of Napata and that of Meroe, signaling a major shift from north to south. However, there is clear evidence of elite burials at Meroe as early as the 2nd half of the 8th century bce. In the mid-6th century King Malonagen celebrated the renewal of royal power there on the occasion of the New Year, and by the later 5th century it is clear that the main residence of the king was at Meroe while Napata was, and remained, the major religious center of the realm.



*Figure 1. Royal tomb pyramids of Meroe (Begarawiyah), where the kings, queens, and princes of Kush were interred.*

*Source: Derek Welsby.*

Broadly contemporary with the foundation of the royal cemetery at Meroe, significant developments in many aspects of Kushite culture can be observed. To a large extent these developments reflect the nature of the culture in Egypt by which the Kushites continued to be heavily influenced. The conquest of Egypt by Alexander and the establishment soon thereafter of the Macedonian Ptolemaic dynasty brought it firmly into the Hellenistic world and, in 30 bce, into the Roman world. These events brought about dramatic changes in art and architecture and many of these influences impacted on Kush. The archaeological record shows Hellenistic and Roman objects arriving in some quantity, and the appearance of new Egyptian styles evident on fineware pottery decoration and in architecture, most notably in the so-called Hathor shrine at Naqa. This building is basically pharaonic Egyptian in form, but with decorative elements taken straight from Greek and Roman architecture, alongside some aspects of the local architectural and artistic traditions.

Among other borrowings from Egypt in the early Kushite period was the written language, used extensively in its hieroglyphic form for royal and religious texts. Although many Kushites may have used Egyptian, particularly during the period of Kushite control of Egypt, their indigenous language was very different. It is assumed that this language, which scholars call Meroitic, had long been established in the Middle Nile valley (Rilly 2014: 1171). Certainly by the early 3rd century bce a writing system was

developed for the Kushite language. Meroitic is an alphasyllabic language with 19 characters which include the vowel *a* unless otherwise indicated, four signs incorporating a fixed vowel, and a word divider. It has recently been assigned to the Northern East Sudanic group of languages which appear to have been spoken widely in parts of northeastern Africa. Although studied extensively since the early 20th century it still defies translation. With both a hieroglyphic and “cursive” character-set Meroitic was extensively used throughout the later Kushite period for royal inscriptions and religious texts, gradually supplanting Egyptian, but also for everyday communication with examples of texts on papyri, parchment, ostraca, and graffiti written on objects and walls, suggesting that its use was widely disseminated throughout society.

In the northern part of the realm the Kushite state was largely confined to a narrow strip of land adjacent to the Nile, the deserts to the east and west being mainly uninhabitable. Further to the south, with increasing annual rainfall it was possible to live away from the river at least for a part of the year, while towards its southern borders the environment was that of savannah, allowing much greater opportunities for human settlement. Along the Nile were a number of major urban centers, some set close together. Little is known of many of these sites. At Sedeinga and Soleb no traces of the town have been found, but particularly at the former the massive cemetery indicates its one-time existence and importance. At Dokki Gel there were large temples and again cemeteries, but little to indicate the nature of the town. At Kawa recent archaeological activities are providing evidence for a heavily built-up town with temples, industrial areas, store buildings, and houses covering almost 40 hectares. At Muweis, current archaeological work is also revealing many components of the town.

Napata may have been a term applied to a region rather than an individual site. Amongst its components is the religious center at the foot of Jebel Barkal, perhaps with an extensive town now destroyed by cultivation towards the river, and a large settlement 5.5 km downstream across the river at Sanam Abu Dom. At the latter was an immense storage building of 35 rooms along a central corridor, with external dimensions of about 267 by 68 m. Meroe is the largest urban complex known in Kush. There is evidence here for early Kushite monumental buildings which were later superseded by many palatial dwellings, temples, and a water sanctuary, all surrounded by a substantial stone wall, the so-called royal enclosure, pierced by gateways and embellished with projecting towers at the angles (Török 1997). If this was defensive, the building of a large Amun temple immediately to its east soon after its construction will have seriously compromised its military value. Elsewhere in the town were houses, more palaces and temples and extensive industrial quarters, associated with pottery production and most notably iron working. One striking feature of these urban centers is the absence of defenses. Only at Meroe and possibly at Hamadab are they provided, enclosing a part of the settlement, but in both cases they were soon abandoned and built over, never being reinstated.

To the east of Meroe along the *wadis* in the dissected sandstone plateau of the Keraba are many small and one large settlement, Naqa, the only one investigated in any detail and even here the focus has been on the religious monuments. However, the evidence indicates that Naqa was a settlement of “palatial” buildings, suggesting that this was not in fact a permanently occupied town but one visited seasonally by the royal court for ritual activities and/or as a demonstration of royal control over the region. The nearby site of Musawwarat es-Sufra was certainly a ritual center. The other settlements in the region are frequently associated with water reservoirs (*hafirs*) that appear to have been constructed and maintained by the state, the presence of which is marked by lion statuary and frequently by small temples. These installations, which will have become foci for the nomadic

component of Kush's population after the rains, as water sources became of paramount importance, will have acted as centers of state control allowing interaction with, and taxation of, these highly mobile groups at least for a short period each year.

The Kushite economy was primarily based on the agricultural potential of the Nile valley and, in the south, of its hinterland. Major settlements were located in the more productive parts of the valley. A wide range of crops were grown with sub-Saharan plants dominating in the southern part of the realm, while further north a dual cropping regime was practiced with the use in the winter of Mediterranean crops and in the summer of African ones. Animal husbandry was complementary, animals being turned loose in the fields after harvesting and incidentally fertilizing the land as they went. In the more marginal areas sheep and goats thrived while cattle with their much higher water requirements had a more restricted distribution. Other domesticates, such as pigs and chickens, are visible in the archaeological record. The role of fish in the diet is uncertain partly because fish bones, being small and fragile, do not survive well. Hunting played a small part in supplementing the human diet. Commercial crops included cotton, while timber was extensively utilized for building materials, the manufacture of objects, and particularly as fuel for cooking and industrial activities.

Much of Kush was a marginal environment and, apart from the people based on the Nile – an exotic river relying on the climate principally of the Ethiopian highlands for its water – even minor fluctuations in climate will have had a profound impact on its population. The early Kushite climate may have been significantly wetter than that of today, as has been illustrated recently at Gala Abu Ahmed in the lower Wadi Howar (Jesse, Eichhorn, and Kahlheber 2013). For the *hafir* system to have operated in the later Kushite period there must have been more rainfall than at present.

The available data suggests that Kush was a centralized state dominated by the ruler, although occasionally joint rule with a consort occurred. Deputies were appointed, among them the *pesto* charged with administering the northern part of the kingdom. In the later period there is evidence for lower-ranking administrators being drawn from local elite families who followed a well-developed *cursus honorum* encompassing both religious and civic appointments. The temples may have played a significant role in the economic administration of the riverine areas but details are lacking.

Around 300 ce inscriptions of King Yesebekhe-Amani from Qasr Ibrim and Meroe indicate that the state retained its territorial integrity over much of the Middle Nile valley. Half a century later the Kingdom of Kush had collapsed, but exactly how and why is uncertain. The rulers of Kush had grown wealthy as the middlemen in trade along the Nile downstream into Egypt and on to the Mediterranean World. Two factors caused a significant decline in this trade: economic collapse within the Roman Empire in the 3rd century ce, and a shift in the trade routes to the Red Sea, allowing the direct import of African goods via the Aksumite kingdom of the Ethiopian highlands. The diminution of wealth of the Kushite rulers is reflected in their graves and tomb monuments, while the relative wealth of the elite was increasing. An inability of the king to have the means to patronize the elite may have led to a reduction in central control and the fragmentation of the state. The early to mid-4th century was also marked (apparently) by conflicts with Aksum. The discovery of a few Aksumite objects in Meroe, two of them parts of the stone thrones habitually set up by the Aksumites on the limits of their conquered territories, suggests that Meroe may have been occupied at that time, while there are hints that other groups had assumed control of Kushite territory. Nubian-speaking tribes, first mentioned in a Kushite text dated to around 100 bce and referred to as Nob (pronounced Noba, meaning “slave” in Meroitic: Rilly 2014: 1179), had wrested control from the Kushites by the end of the 4th century ce, and by the

6th century had established the kingdoms of Nobadia, Makuria, and Alwa (Alodia) between the First Cataract and the Gezira. The Kushite language did not long survive the demise of the state; the last inscription in Meroitic appears to date to the beginning of the 5th century; Kushite religion survived a little longer, being only totally expunged by the arrival of Christianity, certainly by the 6th century.

The tomb of the latest ruler buried at Meroe was marked by a rubble-and-red-brick pyramid. However, that tomb-monument must have been built by his successor, as it seals the tomb shaft. What became of the last king of Kush and where he was buried is unknown. He reigned over 1100 years after his predecessor Alara, the first ruler known to us by name.

SEE ALSO: Aksum, Kingdom of; Assyrian Empire; Egypt: 1. Ancient (New Kingdom); Nomads; Roman Empire: 1. To 96 ce; Trade and commerce; War, weaponry, and empire: 1. Ancient

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